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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**A rapid assessment of the safety and wellbeing
of sanitation workers during lockdown in South Asia**

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Background

By late March 2020, South Asian governments imposed long periods of lockdown to curb the spread of the Covid-19. The movement of the general population was restricted, and only essential services were allowed to continue operating. Among those essential workers were workers in the sanitation service chain (pit emptiers, toilet cleaners, etc.), solid waste workers and cleaners (henceforth called ‘sanitation workers’ for simplicity). These workers kept vital services running during this pandemic and ensured towns, cities and communities stayed clean, healthy and liveable. To do so, they had to keep moving across different areas, be it collecting waste, emptying pits or cleaning public places. Some had to collect or process household waste, including Covid-19 infected waste. In other cases, such as cleaners in health care facilities, they work in high-risk, and in quarantines and containment zones.

In normal times, sanitation workers across South Asia tend to be socially and economically marginalised, and many of them live in congested colonies or slums. They face stigma because of their profession, compounded by caste, religion or class-based discrimination. Vulnerable groups, especially people living in poverty and migrants, are more likely to engage in sanitation work. Sanitation workers face greater risk of infection, injury and death than other workers, and rarely have insurance or access to health services.

In the midst of a pandemic, there was a risk sanitation workers would have to carry on working, without much consideration of their rights to health, safety and dignity or of their voices. In order to understand the nature and extent of the challenges faced by sanitation workers during the lockdown, WaterAid conducted studies in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, between April and June 2020 through telephonic interviews with sanitation workers and key informants. The study, with differences across the four countries, revealed four common insights. However, these must be read keeping in mind the limitations of the study, including the rapid nature of the study and the equally rapid development of the pandemic and of the governments’ responses since the study was conducted.

Findings

Protective measures

Workers were aware of the symptoms and risks posed by COVID-19, but were in many cases ill-equipped to manage these dangers due to lack of specific guidance or formal training, limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE), and inadequate handwashing and cleaning facilities. Inadequate supply of equipment was identified across geographies as presenting a challenge to the consistent use of PPE. For instance, in Bangladesh, half of the respondents mentioned that they had to spend their own money to buy PPE. Fit and comfort is another critical challenge around ensuring the use of protective gear. Hand and PPE hygiene was similarly hindered by insufficient access to handwashing facilities and supply while at work.

Discrimination or recognition?

Sanitation workers are frequently subjected to stigma and discrimination, however the consequences of COVID-19 on these workers were mixed. In some cases, the workers received more recognition from the public and employers, along with self-pride for providing essential services during the pandemic. In other cases, workers reported concerns and pressure from neighbours not to return home after work (Bangladesh) and even demands from landlords for them to vacate their homes (Nepal).

Economic distress and safety nets

The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, such as the lack of health insurance or other forms of social protection. While there were examples in some countries of targeted support to sanitation workers, these were limited in scale, leaving most workers to manage any impacts on their health, income and rising expenses on their own. Around half of the respondents reported challenges in meeting their daily expenses. Loss of income during the lockdown was compounded by a rise in food prices, additional expenses for safety gear and hygiene supplies, and cost of transportation. With a few exceptions, there were no targeted support measures designed for sanitation workers. A considerable amount of workers have been able to access support packages available to the broader vulnerable population.

The informality of sanitation work

These workers also have limited legal protection, which is compounded by the practice of sub-contracting municipal services, as well as high levels of informality within this work, especially more prevalent among female workers. The pandemic magnified the existing vulnerability of workers and informality was correlated with absence of a safety net, of regular income, of insurance cover and of access to PPE.

Recommendations

Recognizing the vital role sanitation workers play and the risks they face carrying out this essential work, the study recommended following five key steps to national governments, municipal authorities and non-government stakeholders.

1. Strengthen social security schemes, emergency financing and access to health insurance targeted at sanitation workers to compensate for risks and protect workers from the high-risk situations they work in, ensuring the inclusion of informal workers.
2. Review urban plans and investments to integrate considerations of sanitation workers. Ensure access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in workplaces and communities for decent and hygienic working and living conditions.
3. Set up and implement the frameworks, protocols and guidelines for the safe provision of sanitation, waste and cleaning services, including training and regular supply of quality PPE. Supporting research and innovation on sanitation and waste work.
4. Support the long-term formalisation of sanitation work, including the support of worker unions, worker-owned enterprises and professional associations.
5. Launching an awareness campaign that challenges the stigma and discrimination sanitation workers face.

The pandemic raised the profile of the role of the sanitation workers as well as highlighted their acute vulnerabilities. India's first vaccine shot given to a sanitation worker recently, and many other states in India followed suit of giving first vaccination shot to a sanitation worker as a celebration of their role. Going ahead requires that, the health and dignity of sanitation workers would require interventions as stated above and a constant vigilance for sustainable services in a rapidly changing world.

References

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